

## WHAT TO DO ABOUT INTERLANGUAGE

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A potentially fruitful area for applied linguistic research is the nature of the linguistic systems used by second language learners as they learn--or even after they appear to have stopped learning. It has been suggested at various times that the findings of this sort of research would be useful not only to language teachers and textbook writers, but also to our understanding of language contact in general and to a general theory of language acquisition. In this paper I will examine some of the claims for and about this area of research that have been made in recent years.

We used to think that we would be able to predict some of the behavior of second language (L2) learners by looking at the similarities and differences between their native language (NL) and the target language (TL) that they were trying to learn. We thought that if we did a rigorous enough analysis of the NL and the TL, we would have the equipment we needed to prepare the best set of pedagogical materials or to be ready to deal with problems in the classroom. The contrastive analysis would tell us where the two languages differed, and thus where we could expect interference errors (now called language transfer errors) to crop up; it would tell us where the two languages were similar, and thus where we would be able to expect facilitation of language learning. Making up our textbooks or lesson plans, we would naturally place more emphasis on areas of interference and less on areas of facilitation.

The so-called "strong contrastive analysis hypothesis" (Lee 1968) predicted that all errors made by L2 learners would be interference errors. This was easily disproved, since plenty of errors appeared that had no discernible source in the NL. The "weak contrastive analysis hypothesis" (Wardhaugh 1970) was then advanced, predicting that some errors would be predicted by a contrastive analysis. This is of course less easily disproved, and depends to a great extent on the nature of the model used to describe the two languages.

After the heyday of contrastive analysis came Error Analysis (Corder 1967), a taxonomic method of cataloguing the errors made by L2 learners and looking at them to see where they came from. The empirical data gathered this way would, it was thought, help us to discover the etiology of the errors. At first, we thought there were two main types of error: interlingual or interference errors, and intralingual or overgeneralization errors. A third

type, developmental errors, has been proposed (Richards 1971), but it is unclear whether these errors, which are supposedly based on learning strategies, are substantively different from intralingual errors. If you made an error, you had done it either because you were illegally transferring a linguistic element or a linguistic relationship (to use the broadest possible terms) from your NL to production of the TL, or because you had made an analogical extension of something you had already learned in the TL. Thus, a Persian speaker, having diligently learned that it is wrong to say \*This is the book that I read it might misapply the it-deletion rule and produce \*This shirt is so tight that I can't wear. Unfortunately, learner errors refused to be so neatly categorized. Looking at the actual communicative production of L2 learners, we found many errors that appeared to have no origin in either the NL or any TL generalization. It was true, of course, that as students gained more knowledge of the TL they made fewer interference errors and more overgeneralization errors, but all along there were many other errors with no obvious source.

Recently, applied linguists have become dissatisfied with looking only at the errors made by L2 learners. Interest has shifted to linguistic phenomena other than errors, such as the order of morpheme acquisition (Larsen-Freeman 1975) in L2 learning, avoidance strategies (Tarone 1977), and a model of L2 performance known as the Monitor Model (Krashen 1977), in which it is claimed that there is a difference between L2 learning and L2 acquisition. In addition to these somewhat narrowly-defined fields, a far more ambitious field for research has emerged. For about the last fifteen years, starting with Corder (1967), people have been advocating looking at the whole of L2 performance, not just the errors. (See, e.g., Nemser 1971, Dickerson 1975, Schmidt 1980, and Eckman 1981.) It has been argued that correct performance can be just as interesting and revealing as incorrect performance, and that the linguistic competence of L2 learners can and should be described. The name given to this competence by Selinker (1972) is Interlanguage (IL).

Although Selinker did not, in his original article, explicitly state what has now come to be known as the "Interlanguage Hypothesis", he laid the groundwork for a number of studies based on the notions he introduced. One study (Tarone et al. 1976) succinctly stated the hypothesis as follows:

There exists a separate linguistic or psycholinguistic system (interlanguage) which forms in the mind of the learner and may take the form of a pidgin and which may develop into a language in its own right. (96)

Tarone et al. go on to detail the IL hypothesis:

There are four sets of observable facts upon which the IL hypothesis is based, and which may be used to evaluate that hypothesis. Each of these observable facts is studyable: first, the stability over time of certain errors and other surface forms in learner-language systems (i.e., "fossilization"); second, the mutual intelligibility that appears to exist among speakers of an IL; third, the phenomenon of backsliding, or the regular appearance in bilingual speech of errors that were thought to be eradicated; and fourth, the systematicity of the IL at one particular point in time. (97)

Since the introduction of IL to the applied linguistics lexicon, the term has been generally accepted to mean the language learner's use of the TL, usually in speech, and always in communicative situations. I believe it is seldom, if ever, used to refer to TL production during drills and exercises, although the term is being used rather loosely nowadays, as one can see by looking at the table of contents of any recent issue of TESOL Quarterly.

Among the things we require of scientific hypotheses, if they are to be called scientific, is that they explain phenomena not explained, or explained less elegantly, by previous hypotheses; and that they be falsifiable. That is, they must make predictions about observable events in a narrow enough way that should these predictions not be borne out, the hypothesis can be disproved. A hypothesis that makes no predictions, or whose predictions can never be tested, is not a hypothesis. An irrefutable hypothesis explains nothing. If I say that the universe rests on the back of a giant turtle, my hypothesis cannot be tested, because we cannot get outside the universe and have a look to see if what is holding it up is in fact a turtle. For all we know, it might be an elephant; there might be elephants all the way down. Since the hypothesis cannot be tested or disproved by observation of the facts, it says nothing about the nature of the universe.

When dealing with narrower data, such as language, we can also make refutable and irrefutable hypotheses. If I claim that no language will be found with only voiced fricatives and no voiceless ones, my hypothesis is easily disproved. Someone could find a counterexample tomorrow in a language which did have only voiced fricatives. But if I turn the hypothesis around, and say that I think that languages with only voiced fricatives do exist, my hypothesis is irrefutable, since I can always claim that we have

just not looked hard enough. My hypothesis therefore says nothing about the nature of language.

Let us now turn to the IL hypothesis. Before looking at its refutability, let us consider whether it explains what previous hypotheses have failed to deal with. Tarone et al. cite the four sets of observable facts listed earlier: stability, mutual intelligibility, backsliding, and systematicity. Are any of these explained, or explained in a new improved way, by the IL hypothesis? Let us look at each in turn.

Stability. By this, workers in the IL field mean showing "consistency in the use of forms over time" (Tarone et al. 1976:97). In other words, L2 students who use the same forms the second time you look at them that they did the first time you looked are showing stability. It is unclear to me that a whole new hypothesis is needed to explain the human propensity to learn things slowly, and to keep making the same mistakes. In other words, I do not think that such stability as is shown by L2 learners in their use of the TL is something that is better explained by the IL hypothesis than by the more general hypothesis that language is rule-governed behavior. The matter of stability becomes even less interesting when we find out that Tarone et al. have decided to distinguish two types of IL users. A Type I individual is one whose IL is characterized by stability, and a Type II individual is one whose IL is characterized by instability--that is, Type II's continue to learn. Thus one of the facts that the IL hypothesis purports to explain turns out to be rather circularly dealt with. If your student's IL's are stable, they must be Type I's; if their IL's are unstable, they must be Type II's. How do you tell which type a person is? By the stability of his/her IL, of course.

Systematicity. Tarone et al. (97) call learner speech systematic "when it evidences an internal consistency in the use of forms at a single point in time". It is not clear just how internally consistent learner speech has to be before it is considered systematic. Nor is it clear whether IL's are just as systematic as NL's, more so, or less so. We all know that native languages show more variation than many linguists would like, with different forms used in different sociolinguistic contexts. Are IL's as prone to variation as NL's? Perhaps they are not. I know that when I communicate in a foreign language, I tend to use a much smaller range of styles than native speakers would, because I have a smaller range at my command. I therefore have more systematicity, according to this definition, in my IL than in my NL. If you have fewer shirts to wear than your neighbor, you will wear the same shirt more often than he will. Thus to my mind the systematicity of IL is not something to be wondered at.

Mutual Intelligibility. Language teachers are fond of recounting anecdotes about a Japanese student interpreting the English of an Arabic speaker for the teacher, or a group of elementary ESL students apparently conversing among themselves in English while a native English speaker listens uncomprehendingly. I know of no serious research that has been done to try to measure the mutual intelligibility of various stages of IL. Do the students from one class understand those from another, or only their classmates? Do more advanced students understand less advanced students, or is it the other way round? How do you tell? Adjemian (1976) puts the case admirably for having one's mutual intelligibility cake and eating it:

Mutual intelligibility is an inherent property of ILs as a result of their being members of the set of possible humane languages. The notion "mutual intelligibility" is relevant at the very onset of a study: it must first be established whether a group of learners can communicate verbally with each other in a language other than their NL. If so, then it may be assumed that they share an IL. If not, then it may be claimed that they do not yet possess enough of a non-native grammar to have caused the emergence of an IL. (300)

The mutual intelligibility that the IL hypothesis is supposed to explain is thus adduced as evidence for the IL itself. If they can understand one another, they have an IL--how else could they understand one another? If they can't, they must not have one--if they did, they could understand one another. This kind of reasoning can be applied to tennis: if you hold your mouth right, you will serve an ace. If you don't serve an ace, you must have been holding your mouth wrong.

Backsliding. All language teachers are familiar with, and despair of, backsliding. The term is used to mean the apparent mastery of a linguistic form in the classroom, but the non-use or incorrect use of that form in communication. I do not see that backsliding is peculiar to second language learning, or that we need to explain it in terms other than the normal patterns of human learning behavior, whether one is trying to learn to ride a bicycle, play the trombone, or be fair to one's spouse. The IL hypothesis seems to me to predict more that backsliding would not occur than that it would.

None of the four phenomena that the IL hypothesis purports to explain, then, need to be explained by a new linguistic hypothesis. Let us now look at the falsifiability of the entire hypothesis. Does it predict observable events? Can it be disconfirmed by looking at observable data? In order to disconfirm

it, one would have to show that there is in fact no system separate from the NL and TL which develops in the mind of the learner. One would have to show that the learner has simply grafted some TL forms onto the internalized NL system--or that he/she has in fact internalized the TL system in one gulp, but also has a set of deletion, truncation, and general mess-up rules to unlearn, such as was once posited for children acquiring their first languages. Neither of these positions is provable, nor could any data be found to support them.

There is nothing, therefore, that we can ever hope to observe which would disprove the IL hypothesis. It therefore tells us nothing about second language acquisition. It makes no prediction which could ever turn out not to be the case, so what good is it? Is the emperor really wearing no clothes? I think that the idea of interlanguage can be useful. It has stimulated us to look at more than the errors made by L2 learners, and to try to look at the whole of whatever linguistic systems they are using. By looking at the things they get right, as well as at the things they get wrong, we might begin to find out what it is that is easily learned, and build on that in our textbooks and lesson plans. In getting us away from our preoccupation with errors, IL has done well. If professionals in the field now want to use the term to mean "communicating in a foreign language", that's fine. But let's stop calling it a hypothesis.

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